

**DATE:** May 11, 2021

**TO:** Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

**SUBJECT:** Strategic Plan Update: COVID-19 Re-Entry Strategy

**ORIGINATOR:** Nancy Petersen, Managing Director, Strategic Division Supports

**RESOURCE**

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**ISSUE**

The purpose of this Strategic Update is to provide the Board of Trustees with:

- A comprehensive summary of the Division's journey in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A high level overview of the 2020-2021 school year through the perspective of COVID-19 strategies and practices, including details, data and reflections on the impact of these strategies and practices.
- A summary of lessons learned over this past year and how some of these learnings will inform the work of the Division.

**BACKGROUND**

In 2018, Edmonton Public Schools formally reaffirmed the District Strategic Plan for the 2018-2022 term. The District Strategic Plan has three priority areas with supporting goals and outcomes. The plan provides common direction and alignment between the work of the Board of Trustees, the Superintendent of Schools and Division staff. The plan serves as the foundation for a Division culture of evidence-based decision making, assurance and accountability.

To demonstrate the Division's commitment to transparency and accountability, Strategic Plan Update reports were introduced in 2016–2017 as an extension of the Annual Education Results Report (AERR). The reports are intended to provide the Board of Trustees with detailed progress towards the goals and outcomes of our Strategic Plan.

**CURRENT SITUATION**

This Strategic Plan Update report highlights Edmonton Public Schools unwavering commitment and focus to providing high-quality teaching and learning in environments that keep students, staff and families as safe as possible during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

**KEY POINTS**

This Strategic Plan Update Report provides the Board of Trustees with a comprehensive summary of the Division's journey in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES**

ATTACHMENT I Strategic Plan Update: COVID-19 Re-Entry Strategy

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# Strategic Plan Update:

COVID-19 Re-Entry

May 11, 2021

## INTRODUCTION

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*“The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents.”*

- United Nations, 2020

While the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted education globally, what remains unchanged is Edmonton Public Schools’ unwavering commitment and focus to providing high-quality teaching and learning in environments that keep students, staff and families as safe as possible. Edmonton Public Schools is honoured to serve students and families in the Edmonton area. The occurrence of the global pandemic introduced many complexities but it did not change our commitment to our vision: success, one student at a time.

The Division acted swiftly during the 2019-2020 school year to address the impacts of COVID-19. A high level summary of the Division’s response from March to August 2020 is captured in the [Division’s 2019-2020 Annual Education Results Report \(AERR\)](#). In planning for the 2020-2021 school year, [Alberta Education’s 2020-2021 School Re-Entry Plan](#) stipulated that “everyone in the ECS-12 education system [must] be nimble in contributing to the success of our children and students”. The Division embraced this guidance when planning for the 2020-2021 school year. All aspects of the Division’s learning and working environments were considered during planning, while also leaving room for flexibility and innovation in order to adapt to changing circumstances within the unpredictability of the pandemic.

The purpose of this Strategic Update is to provide the Board of Trustees with:

- A comprehensive summary of the Division’s journey in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A high level overview of the 2020-2021 school year through the perspective of COVID-19 strategies and practices, including details, data and reflections on the impact of these strategies and practices.
- A summary of lessons learned over this past year and how some of these learnings will inform the work of the Division.

## OUR COVID-19 JOURNEY

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Beginning in spring 2020 and throughout the 2020-2021 school year, the Division participated in ongoing engagement with families, students and staff to better understand their needs during the pandemic. Due to the evolving nature of the pandemic and the many new elements of the COVID-19 Re-Entry Strategy, it was important for the Division to have several check-ins with stakeholders throughout the year.

In May 2020, a Re-Entry Survey was distributed to students, staff and families; feedback from this survey helped the Division gain a better understanding of people’s feelings about coming back to school for the 2020-2021 school year, and helped to validate and strengthen Division planning. Since last May, the Division has continued to seek feedback through focus groups, surveys and ongoing dialogue with leaders. This feedback has enabled the Division to be responsive and adapt as required in navigating this uncharted, and at times complex, journey.

From the start, the Division understood that there were operational logistics unique to re-entry that would need to be established. Staff stepped up across schools and central departments to build the systems and processes needed for a safe re-entry, while continuing to prioritize teaching and learning. Re-entry and the first quarter tested many of these systems and processes, resulting in improvements based on feedback and experience. As staff from central and schools adapted their work to the unique requirements and realities of the 2020-2021 school year, they also continued to navigate emerging unanticipated factors presented by the pandemic.

The Division has always recognized the importance of collaboration and relationships to the success of any initiative or project. This has never been more clear than this year, as the Division has sought to support the well-being and safety of

its students, staff and families while returning to school during a global pandemic. The sudden pivot to emergent remote learning in March 2020 combined with the COVID-19 health restrictions was isolating for everyone. In the work to prepare for the 2020-2021 school year, relationships were a critical focus as innovative practices and creative problem solving were being developed to support school re-entry. This focus on relationships and creative ways to remain connected included both the online and in-person learning environments. Examples of how schools have adapted and prioritized connection and relationships within the protocols of the pandemic include:

- Students and families engaging in a range of virtual extracurricular activities and school events (school assemblies, school council meetings, after school programming).
- Schools engaging in team-building activities, including socially distanced friendly competitions like snowman building, costume contests, social media challenges and theme days across cohorts.
- Schools and the Division working with community partners to ensure families had access to the supports they needed. This work with partners reached across a range of areas including food security, access to technology, Wi-Fi support and overall well-being.

The Division's cornerstone value of collaboration serves to inform how we do our work; the unique spirit and energy that comes from collaborating has been foundational to the Division's pandemic response. Examples of this collaboration include:

- Curriculum Learning Supports and the Technology Integration and Planning Support (TIPS Team) working together to support online teaching and learning.
- Human Resources and Student Information working together to support student enrolment and staffing for the online learning cohort.
- Assistant Superintendents and principals coming together on a regular, timely basis to discuss challenges, solve problems and ensure clear understanding of COVID-19 protocols.
- The Distribution Centre transforming itself into a COVID-19 warehouse, coordinating the procurement and distribution of PPE and cleaning supplies and working with schools as they implemented a range of health-related COVID-19 safety protocols (directional stickers, hand sanitizer, cleaning etc.).
- Technology and Information Management collaborating with other central departments and schools to enhance and develop a variety of online processes to promote safety and access.

Mental health was a priority for the Division even before the pandemic. This focus further intensified during COVID-19 and was a key area of planning for the 2020-2021 school year. As part of a provincial project between the four metro boards, a series of [mental health resources](#) were created to support school re-entry, welcoming students back to school, reconnecting and the unique circumstances of the pandemic. The emphasis on mental health is also reflected by the following actions taken by the Division for this school year:

- Schools were able to bring students back to school under a staggered entry; this supported students coming in in small groups or individually and enabled teachers the opportunity to connect intentionally with students and families at the start of the year.
- Nine additional social workers were hired to support schools in their efforts to remain engaged with families and to check on the safety and well-being of students.
- School-linked teams were established to support a coordinated, intentional approach to supporting mental health. These teams are made up of the following positions in order to provide cross-disciplinary support to schools:
  - Mental health consultants
  - Social workers
  - School family liaisons
  - Occupational therapists
  - Psychologists
  - Education behaviour consultants
- An Alberta Health Services grant supported the hiring of wellness coaches; these positions were filled mid-year and the Division topped up this funding to enable there to be one wellness coach per catchment.

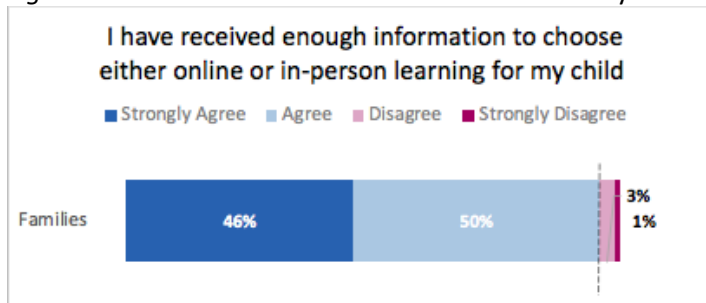
- The Division extended its work with Dr. Michael Ungar, the founder and Director of the [Resilience Research Centre](#) at Dalhousie University, to support school administrators, teachers and parents/caregivers in addressing the well-being and resilience of students.
  - This year's work included professional learning for staff, two parent sessions with Dr. Unger and 87 schools participating in the student resiliency and engagement survey.
- Division students and families were invited to participate in a research partnership with Dr. Kelly Schwartz, Associate Professor in the School and Applied Child Psychology program at the University of Calgary to better understand how children/youth ages 12 to 18 are feeling about their well-being, resilience and their return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - Results for each round of the study, [Student Life During a Pandemic](#), are posted online on the University of Calgary website.

To help students, families and staff feel safe leading into their return to school and throughout the school year, the Division placed a large emphasis on communication. Examples of how the Division reached out to stakeholders include:

- The Board Chair and Superintendent made a video outlining some of the health measures families could expect to see in our schools (6,720 views on epsb.ca). [Welcome back to school 2020-2021](#)
  - This direct communication with families and staff from the Board Chair and Superintendent continued at key points throughout the pandemic.
- Schools created their own welcome back videos specific to their school community; these videos showed families how the school facility was being prepared to support COVID-19 safety protocols and welcomed everyone back for the school year.
- After the release of the Division's Re-Entry Strategy, schools worked from this document to create a more detailed version of the re-entry strategy to reflect the unique circumstances of their school community.
  - Once completed, each school posted its plan to SchoolZone to help families better understand what school would look like for their child this year.
- Key messages and SchoolZone posts have been delivered throughout the year to continue to keep Division leaders, staff, students and families aware of emerging information.

Feedback from the annual Division survey points to the success of the Division's ongoing communication with families and staff as illustrated by the 96 per cent of families who felt that they received enough information to make a choice between online or in-person learning (Figure 1), and the 84 per cent of staff who felt that the communication around the Re-Entry Strategy supported their work this year (not pictured).

Figure 1. Effectiveness of communications for family choice



There is no question that this has been a challenging year unlike anything we have ever experienced. However, there have also been opportunities for growth, new experiences and celebration. The following quotes from this year's Division survey are examples that speak to these strengths:

Staff voice:

- "It has been a time of great transformation and adaptation but in a mostly positive way. I've appreciated having the opportunity to grow and evolve as a professional... "
- "The staff has really come together, supporting each other and creating a new normal that is manageable for staff and students with all the new protocols. I miss the face to face staff meetings and connections...however we have been creative at our online staff/parent meetings to make space for connection and collaboration."

- “From a professional perspective, I have never experienced the degree of authentic collaboration... The community of professionals with whom I communicate regularly has expanded immensely and stretches across the province.”

#### Family voice:

- “Kudos to the teachers for being so flexible and making ways to build relationships during these constraints!”
- “Because of the cohort system, my child made friends and strengthened relationships that might not have happened otherwise.”
- “I’m very pleased with how well our school has managed throughout the pandemic. The communication has been excellent, and my child has felt happy and supported. Most importantly, there has been a persistent sense that we’re all in this together as a school community.”

#### Student voice:

- “I liked the freedom that this school year gave me. By having an ability to choose between in-person learning and online, I was able to more easily suit my needs to my learning.”
- “I liked how they want to keep us safe during this pandemic and try to make it fun though the world is still going through a rough time. I also like how we still get to hang out with our friends but sadly we can't go on field trips anymore.”
- “The school kept everybody really safe. We could still play some games at recess. The teachers always tell people to put on their masks... We are discovering a lot of new fun things we can do and games we can play.”
- “I like this school year a lot because I get to meet new students every quarter. Another reason is you get to be more creative on what you can do.”

## THE COVID-19 RE-ENTRY STRATEGY

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Recognizing relationships and well-being as a focus, on August 4, 2020, the Division publicly released the [COVID-19 Re-Entry Strategy](#), a comprehensive document which established the foundation for what school re-entry would look like for the 2020-2021 school year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The Re-Entry Strategy, which follows provincial requirements, and in some cases exceeds these requirements, was developed around three key themes:

- Family Choice
- Continuity of Learning
- Well-being, Safety and Mitigation of Risk

The following section describes key strategies and practices taken in support of these themes along with supporting information that demonstrates their impact on students, families and staff.

### Family Choice

The Division recognized that in-person classes may not be a comfortable choice for all families depending on personal circumstance and well-being. Family choice focuses on the Division’s efforts to connect families to instruction while ensuring they have an ability to pick a learning mode (i.e., online or in-person learning) that best supports their sense of safety and well-being during the pandemic.

### Strategies and Practices

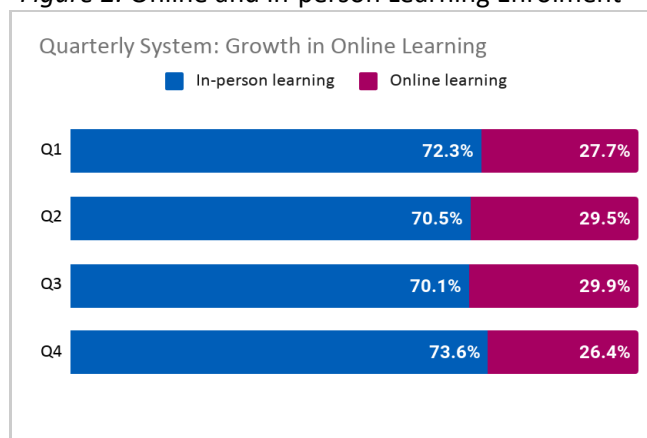
#### Quarterly System

Recognizing families may want to move between online and in-person learning depending on personal circumstances and the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, the Division organized the 2020-2021 school year into four instructional periods called quarters (Q). Before the start of each quarter, families were able to choose in-person or online learning for their child.

The importance of family choice is evident through the 15 per cent of families who transitioned their child between the two modes of learning between Q1, Q2 and Q3, as well as the gradual increase in the number of students participating in online learning (Figure 2).

Based on responses from the 2020-2021 Division Survey, it is clear that families are considering many factors when choosing the learning mode that best suits the needs of their child and their family (Table 1). Many families are balancing concerns about COVID-19 with concerns about their child's mental and emotional well-being.

**Figure 2. Online and In-person Learning Enrolment**



**Table 1. Family reasons for selecting learning mode**

In-person	Online	Transitioning between online to in-person or in-person to online
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Social interaction (86 per cent)</li> <li>2. Learning preference (78 per cent)</li> <li>3. Mental health (78 per cent)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Risk of COVID-19 (84 per cent)</li> <li>2. Health concerns (47 per cent)</li> <li>3. Convenience (18 per cent)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Social interaction (48 per cent)</li> <li>2. Mental health (47 per cent)</li> <li>3. Learning preference (42 per cent)</li> </ol>

## Staffing

The quarterly system would not be possible without significant logistical collaboration between schools and central departments to ensure the appropriate distribution of online and in-person staffing to support high quality teaching and learning. Teachers to support online learning were either newly hired through Division Human Resources or transitioned to an online assignment at the school level to help meet online learning needs (Table 2). Since staffing needs not only shift at the beginning of each quarter but within the quarters, the Division remained responsive and flexible to adapt to changing circumstances.

**Table 2. Online teaching staff distribution for the first three quarters**

Quarter	Permanent staff teaching online	Temporary staff teaching online	Total staff teaching online
Q1	746	329	1075
Q2	763	319	1082
Q3	764	314	1078

Due to the requirement for staff to quarantine and isolate, having a reliable and responsive supply staff pool has been particularly important this year. Ready and able to step in, supply teachers, educational assistants, office staff and custodians have helped to maintain high quality teaching and learning environments when other staff have had to step back. Despite the responsiveness of supply staff, coverage became more challenging with the arrival of the third wave of the pandemic. This can be seen by the following data:

- 95 per cent of 44,728 teaching supply jobs were filled up until the end of April.
  - 99.9 per cent of teaching supply jobs were filled in 2019-2020.
- 81.7 per cent of 28,480 support supply jobs were filled up until the end of April.



- 95.6 per cent of support supply jobs were filled in 2019-2020.
- 88.1 per cent of 16,812 custodial supply jobs were filled up until the end of April.
- 93.2 per cent of custodial supply jobs were filled were filled in 2019-2020.

High numbers of staff being required to quarantine coupled with the inability to fill supply positions are two factors that can significantly impact a school's ability to maintain in-person operations. The Division has taken steps to mitigate this risk, including discouraging schools booking supply teachers for general in-school needs, prioritizing supply staff being deployed to schools facing the greatest operational challenges and encouraging staff to participate in activities like professional learning primarily on one of the Division's designated PL days. Despite these efforts, since January the Division has had to reach out to Alberta Education seeking permission to temporarily transition five schools to online learning due to the combination of staff and students required to quarantine and the challenge of maintaining operations. The approval to temporarily transition to online learning rests with the province.

Student transportation was also impacted by COVID-19 and family choice. In a typical school year, approximately one-third of Division students use the yellow bus or Edmonton Transit Systems (ETS) as their daily means to get to school. The 2020-2021 school year saw a 45 per cent decrease in yellow bus ridership and 69 per cent decrease in ETS ridership. In response to COVID-19, the Division made important changes to student transportation to ensure student safety. Some of these changes included:

- Agreements with contracted yellow bus carriers on a shared approach to cleaning costs to ensure that Government of Alberta health guidelines were implemented effectively for student safety and to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- The implementation of an online tool to coordinate the maintenance of over 1,700 individual seating plans created by schools.
- The creation of an [online application form](#) for yellow bus service on [epsb.ca](#) to facilitate electronic and contactless applications during COVID-19. As of March 2021, over 90 per cent of all transportation applications are received electronically.

## How did we do

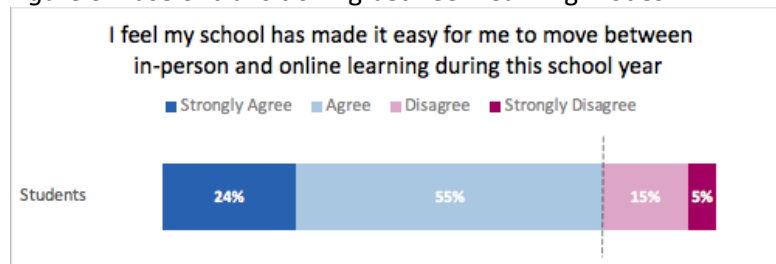
Family feedback from the Division Survey has indicated that the quarterly system was appreciated in honouring family choice during the pandemic. Families commented that:

- "EPSB did a fantastic job in choosing the quarter system - given the changing nature of our understanding of COVID, and given the reality of three different waves, this was a much more realistic approach than other districts chose."
- "[The quarterly system] allowed families to make their own judgment call about rising/falling cases giving them a sense of comfort, choice and control."
- "Breaking the school into quarters gave us parents and our children an opportunity to celebrate a mini milestone. It's nice to have mini fresh starts. Especially during a year that has had its challenges, it was nice to have the mini achievements in the year."

Providing family choice does have its logistical complexity; the hard work and flexibility of Division staff made the transitions as seamless as possible.

Seventy-nine per cent of students felt that their school made the transition between in-person and online learning easy (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Ease of transitioning between learning modes



## Continuity of Learning

To support continuity of learning in a school year that was anticipated to have multiple points of transition, either within the schedule of the quarter system or due to COVID-19 related shifts to online learning, the Division created resources that supported a cohesive and coordinated approach to teaching, assessment and reporting practices.



Strategies and Practices

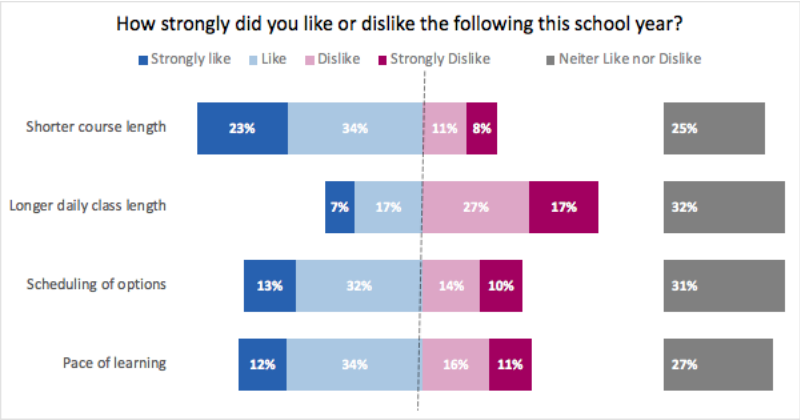
Alignment with the Quarterly System

The main strategy for continuity of learning was to align the program of studies and identify priority learning outcomes (PLO) within each Grades K-9 with the quarterly system, thus ensuring consistency of concepts covered regardless of the learning mode or school. Scope and sequence documents were created for language arts, mathematics, social studies and science for Grades K-9. The frequency and timing of progress reports were also modified to align with the quarterly schedule (i.e., there was a shift from three reporting periods to four reporting periods). High school programming was adjusted to a full quarterly schedule, with students taking up to two classes per quarter.

The alignment with the quarterly system had significant influences on class scheduling for junior high and high school students.

These influences included shorter course length, longer daily class length, a difference in option scheduling and a different pace of learning. Approximately 30 per cent of students did not have strong feelings about the impact of any of these changes on their learning. However, overall shorter course length was the most liked change and longer daily class length was the most disliked change (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Influences of the Alignment with the Quarterly System



Resources

A significant amount of funding and work was invested to develop comprehensive resources to support the consistency and flexibility required for family choice and the quarterly schedule. The work to develop these resources began in spring of 2020 and has had a team of dedicated staff supporting development throughout the 2020-2021 school year. The following resources are examples of materials developed to be responsive to learning needs anticipated this year:

- **Scope and Sequence Documents (K-9):** Documents that align the program of studies with the quarterly system to ensure students within each grade are learning the same unit and concepts around the same time.
- **Teacher/Support Packs:** The packs support Grades K-9 across the four core subject areas and serve as a companion resource to the Scope and Sequence Documents that teachers can use to support instruction both for in-person and online learning. These packs include sample lesson sequences, student activities, video supports, assessment materials etc. Some packs were adapted to support French language programming.
- **Home Support Packs:** A resource for schools to use when supporting students who are absent from class, in alignment with the learning that has occurred while the student is absent.

Quick facts

To support teaching and learning, as of April 2021, Division staff have created:

5,767

resources

1,324

videos

▶ Accessed 566,626 times

▶ Shared with 39 other school Divisions

▶ Accessed 469, 313 times

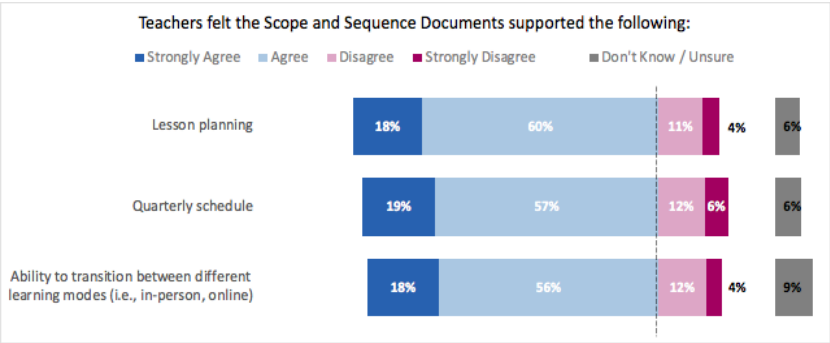
These resources are continually being created, updated and expanded throughout the 2020-2021 school year in response to teacher feedback.

Additional resources, with a focus on online learning, have also been curated. Some of these resources can be found on the publicly accessible [Resource Hub](#), which is a repository of teaching and learning material for families and teachers working outside of the Division. The Hub has been viewed 28,757 times.

**High School Resources:** Throughout the year, high school course packs for select courses have been developed and released. The high school course packs provide teachers with a range of materials including sample lesson plans, video resources, sample assessment materials and student assignments to meet the course requirements. High school course packs are designed to support instruction across a quarterly model. Also created were sample high school scope and sequence documents and course plans for select courses to support planning for instruction within a quarterly model.

When asked about the Scope and Sequence Documents in the Division survey, teachers felt the documents most supported lesson planning, the quarterly schedule and the ability for students to transition between different learning environments (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Teachers’ Perspective on the Scope and Sequence Documents



### Technology Support and Professional Learning

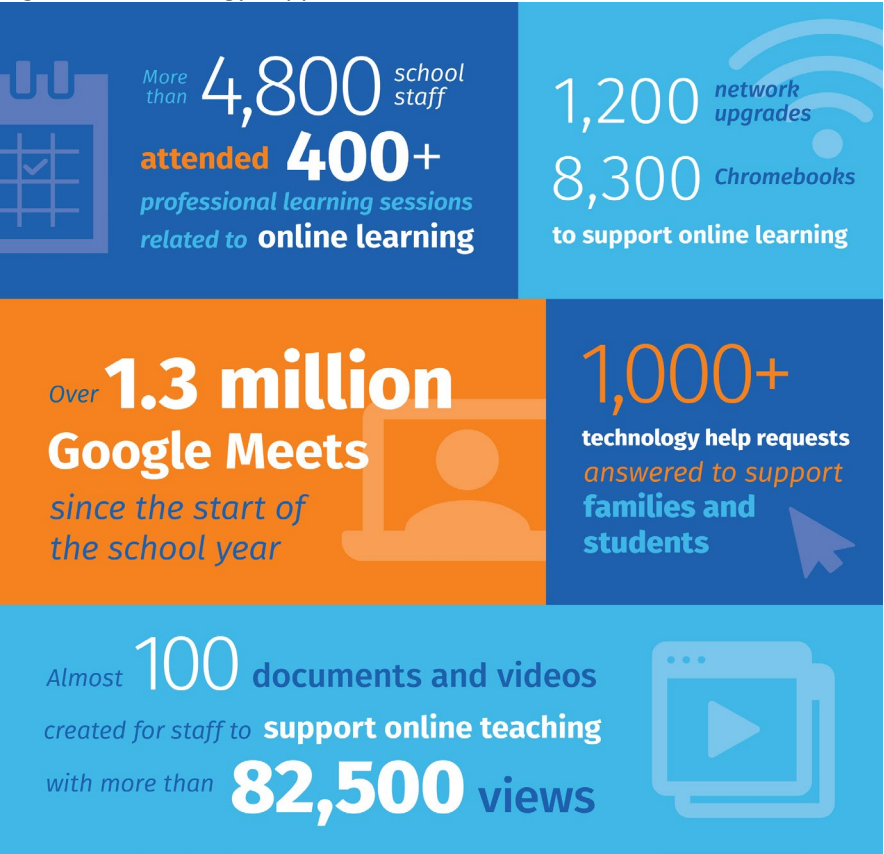
The provision of technological resources, upgrades, support, and professional learning (PL) was instrumental in preparing staff for teaching and learning in the online learning environment (Figure 6).

The Division purchased additional online resources and significant technological upgrades were completed by the Division and third-party suppliers (e.g., Google) to enhance safety, engagement and assessment in online learning and working environments.

While the Division provided technology support to staff, families and students were also able to connect to the Division about their technology needs through <https://techhelp.epsb.ca/>. Through the willingness and lingual diversity of the Technology Information Management Team, the tech support was available to families and students in 20 languages.

Finally, in addition to the professional learning offered in a typical school year, the Division increased its focus on the development and delivery of technology related sessions. To ensure that this learning was accessible for all staff, PL was offered online both synchronously and asynchronously.

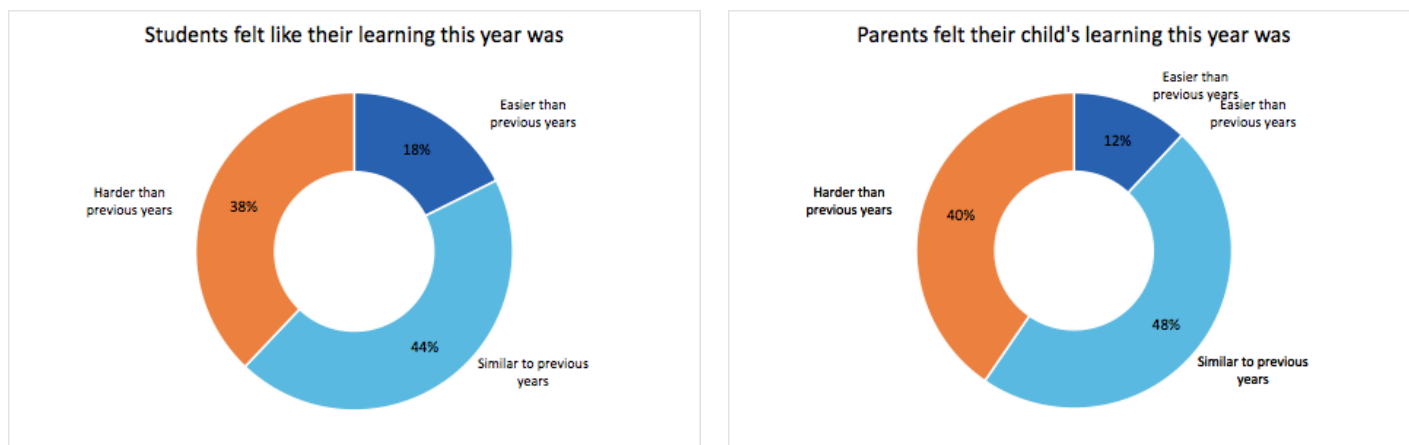
Figure 6. Technology Support and PL in the Division



## How did we do

The Division worked hard to ensure high quality learning environments in light of the complexities introduced by the pandemic and this effort appears to have been noticed by students and families. Approximately 50 per cent of students and parents felt learning was similar to that of previous years (Figure 7a and b).

Figure 7a and 7b. How students and parents felt about learning this year



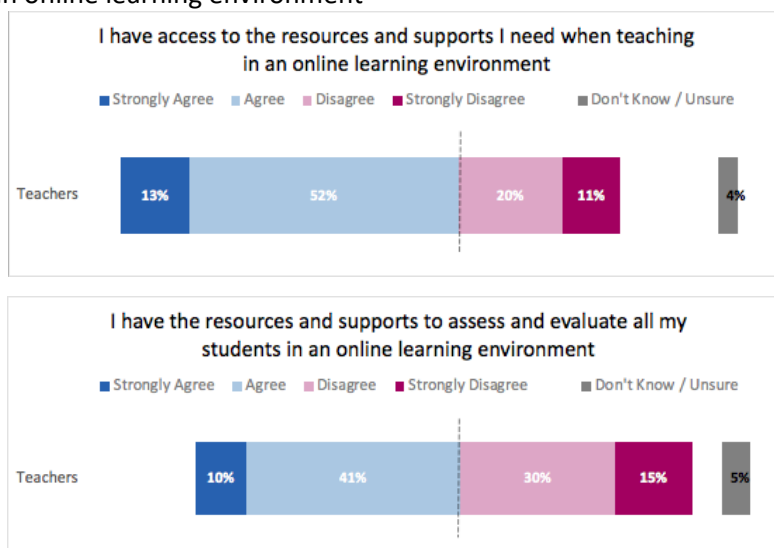
Additionally,

- 86 per cent of families felt their child had the supports and resources they needed to be successful.
- 86 per cent of families felt they had access to the supports they needed to help their child be successful.

The Division's efforts to support staff in the online learning environment is reflected in the 63 per cent of staff who agreed that they felt supported working in an online environment this year (not pictured). Furthermore:

- 63 per cent of teachers indicated they had the resources and supports needed when teaching in an online learning environment (Figure 8a).
- 51 per cent felt they had the resources and supports to assess and evaluate all their students in an online learning environment (Figure 8b).

Figure 8a and 8b: Access to resources and support for teaching and assessing in an online learning environment



Additionally, from the Division Survey staff commented:

- "For our new teachers on staff, the scope and sequence partnered with the teacher resource packs were a fantastic support. Supporting quality lesson planning, and integrating strong pedagogical practices. After the pandemic, I can see these resources as a wonderfully supportive framework to support new teachers."
- "Reporting to parents consistently across the Division worked well. Pairing conferences with interim reports was conducive to goal setting."

Student voice from the survey included:

- “I liked the quarterly system and how I was able to focus on only 2 courses a quarter instead of several courses in a normal year which improved my learning in a way.”
- “I like how we really only had to focus on two subjects at a time. Yes, the pace is really fast, but we are also given the opportunity to only focus on those subjects.”

## Well-being, Safety and Risk Mitigation

Protecting each other is a shared responsibility among all members of the school community. The Division’s COVID-19 safety strategies were developed in accordance with public health guidance, to mitigate or reduce the risk of COVID-19, while also focusing on the well-being of students and staff given the realities of the pandemic.

The Division’s plan was not built around a single strategy, but employed multiple complementary strategies and practices that worked together to support the safest school and work environments possible in terms of mitigating or reducing the risk of COVID-19 including:

- Personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Masking
- Handwashing and sanitizing
- Screening for illness
- Strict illness protocols
- Cleaning standards
- Physical distancing
- Cohorts

## Strategies and Practices

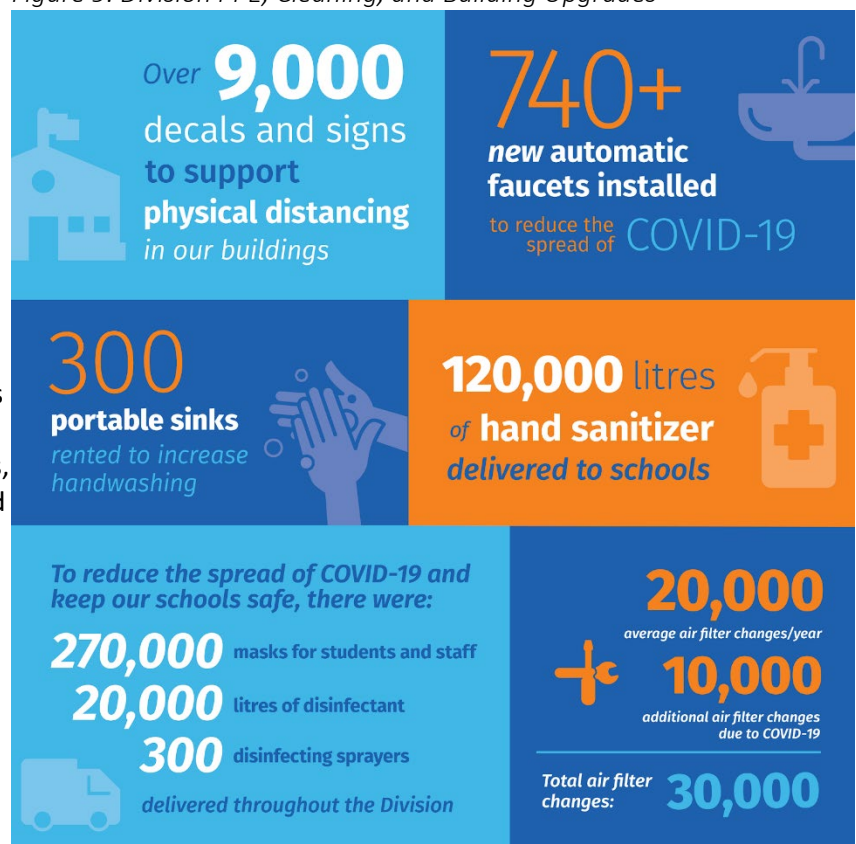
### PPE, Sanitizing, and Cleaning Standards

To ensure Health-approved/recommended products for all Division facilities, the Division adapted quickly to support the central procurement and distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies. Additionally, funding was committed to numerous upgrades to Division buildings that promoted safety (Figure 9).

A large quantity of supplies were procured and distributed. On the busiest day, the Division’s Distribution Center drivers drove a combined total of 1,165 kilometers and made 485 deliveries to schools. The COVID-19 related PPE and supplies included: non-surgical masks, N95 masks, Oxivir TB disinfectant spray, Victory handheld and backpack sprayers, face shields, disposable gowns, gloves and plexiglass shields.

Beyond ensuring that all products were appropriate to mitigate COVID-19, a coordinated, Division-level approach to procure and distribute PPE and cleaning supplies was employed to increase efficiency, lower costs and promote equity throughout the whole process.

Figure 9. Division PPE, Cleaning, and Building Upgrades



Additionally, a number of COVID-19-specific training sessions were developed to support the effective use of PPE, as well as to ensure high standard cleaning and disinfecting methods and procedures. Numerous staff completed these courses including:

- 7,363 staff completed a self-paced training module relative to COVID-19 and the Division's Re-Entry Strategy.
- 500 custodial staff completed three courses related to PPE, cleaning products and equipment and cleaning guidelines.

#### Screening for Illnesses and Strict Illness Protocols

Under provincial direction, staff and students are required to complete illness screening prior to coming to work or attending school:

- Staff are required to complete the Government of Alberta's [COVID-19 screening questionnaire](#).
- Families are required to use the [COVID-19 Alberta Health Daily Checklist \(for children under 18\)](#) with their child.

Principals were responsible to ensure all families were aware of and had access to the provincial checklist. These checklists are available in [multiple languages](#) to make them accessible to families, staff and students.

Although the Division limits visitors allowed in its building this school year, visitors that need to be present at a school complete a contactless check-in/check-out process. This electronic process, which used a QR code and an online form consisting of health screening questions, allowed the Division to easily monitor movement in and out of buildings.

When a confirmed positive COVID-19 case arises, Alberta Health Service and Division officials work together to:

- Determine who is considered to be a close contact of the individual.
- Contact everyone who is considered a close contact.
- Notify all members of the school community that there has been a confirmed positive case.

As part of the Division's intent to be transparent, COVID-19 case numbers are available on [epsb.ca](#) and are routinely reported to staff, the Board of Trustees and the media.

Throughout the pandemic, the Division has been in ongoing communication with Alberta Health Services officials. Though we were unable to obtain information around in-school transmission, the Division receives timely and detailed feedback around our implementation of COVID-19 health and safety protocols. This feedback has helped the Division consistently implement health protocols and has also reinforced the overall strength of the Division's Re-Entry Strategy, including the decision early on to have mandatory masks for students (Grades 4 to 12) and staff.

#### Physical Distancing and Cohorting

The provincial guidelines for school re-entry introduced the concept of cohorts as a key factor to promoting safety. Schools organized around cohorts, with consideration to how a group of students could learn together, play together and have lunch together while limiting the number of staff who would have regular contact with the group of students. K to 6 learning environments were the most conducive to cohorting. Junior High and High School students limited their interactions with others through the quarterly system, postponing some types of activities and following physical distancing protocols.

Beyond changing how we organize for instruction, the Division also looked at how to change many in-person processes to online. One example of this was the work done to replace the in-person registration and pre-enrolment process for new students with an online system. The system enabled families to easily and electronically submit and sign

*As of April 30, 2021, there had been*

**1,685**

Confirmed positive COVID-19 cases  
impacting a Division facility

*These cases have resulted in isolation  
and/or quarantine periods of*

**547, 190** days for students and  
**64,414** days for staff



documentation to pre-register their child in their school of choice. As of April 6, 2021, 8,737 families have used the Division’s new online pre-registration system.

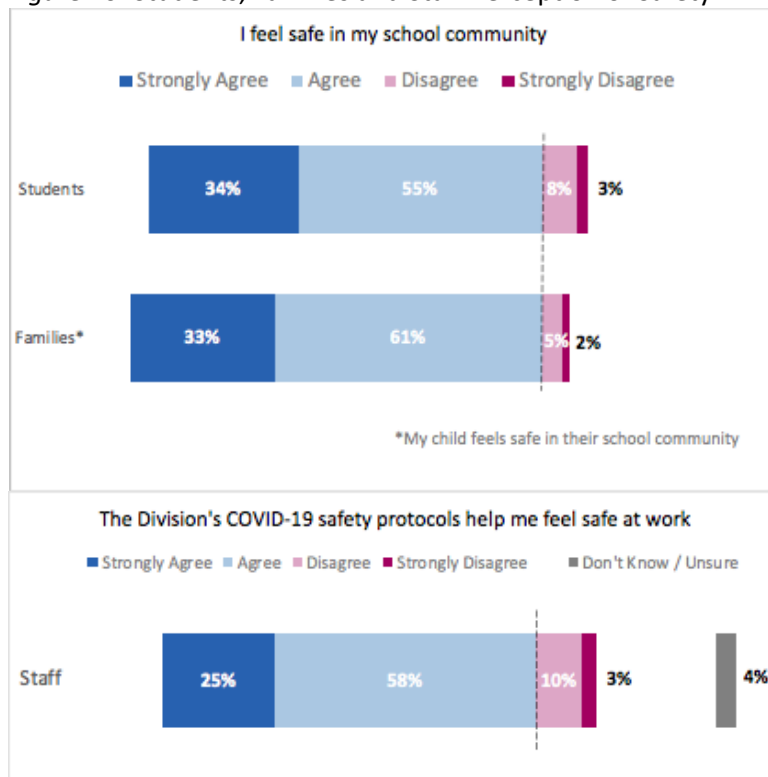
## How did we do

Feedback from the Division survey confirmed that the efforts taken in support of safety and risk-mitigation have been well-received by students, families and staff.

Survey feedback indicated that approximately 90 per cent of students and families agreed (i.e., strongly agree and agree) that they felt safe in their school community. This sentiment was echoed by Division staff, with 83 per cent agreeing that the Division’s COVID-19 safety protocols made them feel safe at work (Figure 10).

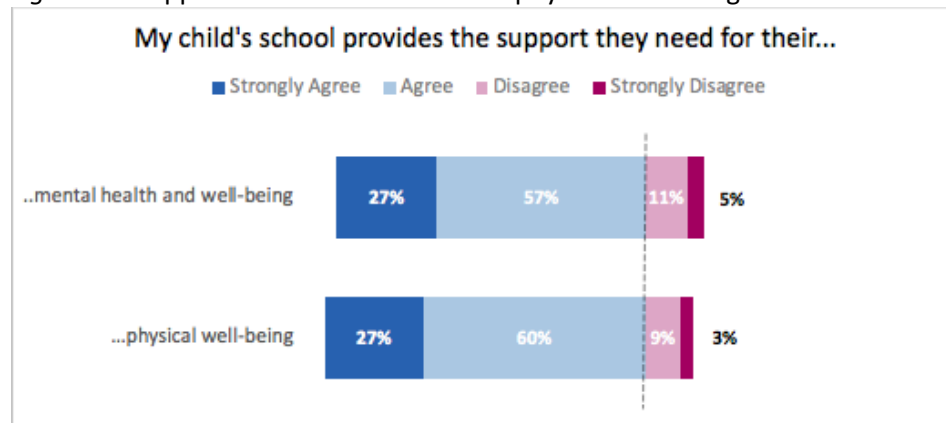
The multiple modes used to communicate the Division’s safety protocols were also effective, with over 90 per cent of families and staff indicating that they knew what their school was doing to keep them and their child safe during the pandemic, and over 80 per cent of staff felt that the Division’s communication around the Re-Entry Strategy was timely (not pictured).

Figure 10. Students, Families and Staff Perception of Safety



With respect to health and well-being, families felt their child’s school provided their child the supports they needed for their mental health and well-being (84 per cent), as well as physical well-being (87 per cent) (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Supports for mental health and physical well-being



Comments from families and staff reflect positively on the Division’s efforts to ensure student and staff safety:

- “I want to say thank you for ensuring students are safe and for communicating messaging clearly. It feels good to know that EPSB, the school, teachers, staff and principals care so much about the students to figure out the logistics

for cohorts, classroom doors, breaks, cleaning, masking and online learning. It's a crazy world out there with covid but it's nice to know that everyone is doing the best to ensure student safety at school.”

- “I believe that the measures EPSB have taken were good and I felt relatively safe sending my children to school.”

## LESSONS LEARNED

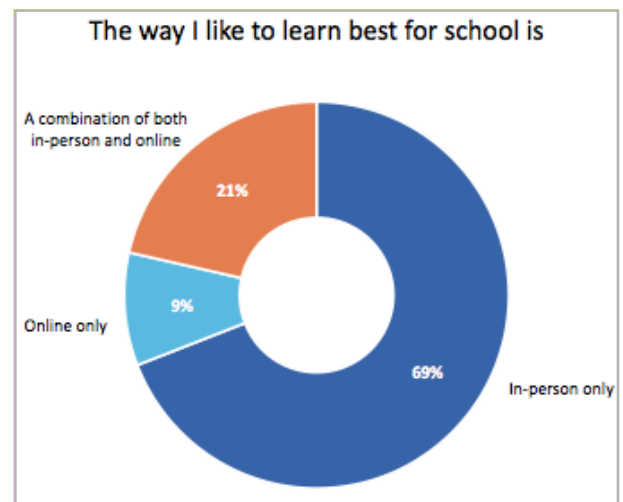
Everyone is eager for the pandemic to be over and for the opportunity to return to many of the activities and ways of being that have been given up during this past year. As we optimistically look ahead, the Division will reflect on the past 12 months and the lessons we have learned. This reflection, along with the experience we have gained will shape the work of the Division in the years to come. Our key learnings include:

**Online Learning:** The Division’s capacity to support the online learning environment has increased significantly since the start of the pandemic. This includes:

- Building the capacity and confidence of Division teachers to work in the online learning environment.
- Developing resources and professional learning opportunities tailored specifically towards the online learning environment.
- Implementing a range of technology upgrades to enhance engagement and flexibility within the online learning environment.

We know that there is much to learn around this learning environment, including the opportunity to further explore synchronous and asynchronous learning and refine online assessment practices to support the reporting of student progress.

Figure 12. Student Learning Mode Preference



Feedback from students also tells us that many students are eager to have online learning available as an option to them (see Figure 12).

**Engagement:** The Division has always valued engagement and the voice of staff, students and families. However, the importance of stakeholder voice was more critical than ever this year, as the Division worked to be responsive and nimble to the ever-changing circumstances presented by COVID-19.

A great example of the effectiveness of engagement is the Division's work to support online learning. The ability to connect with students, families and staff from the online learning cohort at various points in the year enabled the Division to learn and adjust between quarters where there were identified areas for improvement. By engaging at multiple points throughout the year, the Division was able to be responsive much sooner and made adjustments mid-year, as opposed to waiting until next year. This responsiveness was appreciated. The Division has also gained further insight into effective elements of engagement with staff, students, families and the community, including how to host online engagement that supports meaningful results.

**Responsive Planning:** The Re-Entry Strategy was a detailed and complex plan developed in response to the complexity of maintaining school operations during a global pandemic. However, the Division also quickly learned that a good plan also needs to be nimble and responsive to unanticipated or emerging circumstances and change. Early into the school year, the Division developed systems to support ongoing evaluation and updating of key elements of the plan, timely communication with Division leaders regarding changes to the plan and processes to support families in adjusting to unanticipated changes in routines, protocols or expectations. Going forward, Division planning will intentionally allow for change and fluidity over time.



**Family Choice:** Family choice was a key feature to the Division's Re-Entry Strategy and greatly valued by many families during the uncertainty and risk of the pandemic. However, supporting this model in a large urban division comes with many challenges, including the following:

- Family choice proved to be a resource-intensive way of organizing, both in terms of the additional staff required to work directly with students in the online cohort and the support required from central teams to maintain the model.
- Staffing the model at each of the quarterly transitions is disruptive for staff, schools and students, as this transition requires the closing of some online cohorts and the establishment of new ones in response to students moving between in-person and online learning.
- Choosing online learning is one aspect of choice for a family; however, it is not entirely feasible for the Division to provide both online learning for every Division-offered alternative or language program. Despite clear messaging around this limitation, this did result in disappointment for some families.
- Offering family choice at multiple points in a non-pandemic school year would not be operationally efficient or financially feasible. The model of family choice and the online learning required funding beyond the Division's provincial allocation. The costs associated with organizing this way were covered through the Division's \$38.5 million dollars of federal COVID-19 Safe Return to Class Funding.
- Family choice has a direct impact on Division bussing routes and the overall capacity of our transportation service; each quarterly change required a nimble response by transportation services to reschedule routes based on student programming.
  - This has both human resource and financial implications.

**Staffing:** The Division's team of 14,427 staff have stepped into the challenges of the pandemic being flexible, responsive, calm and caring despite the stress and uncertainty of being frontline workers during a pandemic. Across the Division, staff learned new systems, new routines and enhanced protocols for cleaning in a matter of weeks leading into the new school year in preparation to support the Division's operations amidst the pandemic. Over the past several months the following lessons have emerged:

- Quarterly model and family choice: The quarterly model and family choice had a significant impact on Division staffing. As we moved through staffing processes for each quarter, we refined processes based on experience and feedback received. Processes in Quarters 3 and 4 shifted significantly from processes used for Quarters 1 and 2 based on these learnings. Having four times in the year to operationalize around this work surfaced the importance of:
  - Having a designated, committed team of staff from across Central units with the unique skills needed to support this process. It is also important to make adjustments to ensure there is adequate staffing to respond to the tight timelines of each transition and the volume of staffing decisions needed to be made.
  - Implementing administrative efficiencies based on lived experience and making adjustments mid-year to streamline processes.
  - Identifying opportunities to involve principals at key points in the process to support transition for staff and students, as well as maintain teacher/student relationships as much as possible.
- Supply Staff: The Division anticipated that challenges filling supply needs would increase this year due to the pandemic.
  - Various strategies, such as sharing daily absence reports and implementing pilots for recent post-secondary teaching graduates, have been used to work proactively with schools to address supply challenges.
  - During wave two of the pandemic, HR began working intentionally with assistant superintendents and principals to prioritize supply assignments. This enabled the Division to be intentional around supporting schools with greater absences due to COVID-19 related factors.
  - To help encourage supply teachers in accepting assignments, funding was put in place that would pay a supply teacher who was required to quarantine as a result of being on assignment in a school. These supply teachers needing to quarantine due to COVID-19 were then also able to support the online learning environment as long as they were well and able to work.
  - Despite taking intentional steps and seeking ways to add to the roster throughout the year, during waves two and three of the pandemic the system faced challenges with fill rate. In extreme circumstances, schools with a

- This work has provided the Division with the opportunity to experiment with new ways of recruiting staff and intentionally tracking the need for supply that will serve us well in the years ahead.

There is also excitement about the opportunities that next year will bring as we anticipate gradually being able to return to many of the activities and things about school that we miss. The following Wordle highlights the collective responses of staff, students and families when asked what they were most looking forward to at school after the pandemic.



16

## REFERENCES

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United Nations. (2020). *Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond*. Retrieved from [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf)